

CRRAR Summer Institute 2009
Reflective summary on *The Uses of Argument: The Layout of Arguments* by
Toulmin

Pages 94-119

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In this article, Toulmin is primarily concerned with proposing an alternative to the traditional 'premise-conclusion' format which is typically used in argumentation analysis. Toulmin claims that this "two-fold distinction between 'premisses' and 'conclusion' appears insufficiently complex" (114) and instead proposes the adoption of "the four-fold distinction between 'datum', 'conclusion', 'warrant' and 'backing'" (114) in its place. Toulmin says that traditional formal logicians have been "wedded" (116) to the premise-conclusion form for far too long and that this commitment has impoverished argumentative language. The premise-conclusion form of statement rarely appears in practical argument and often logicians attempt to force all arguments to fit this premise-conclusion mold even though "practical speech has habitually employed a dozen different forms – 'Every single A is a B', 'Each A is a B', 'An A will be a B', 'A's are generally B's' and 'The A is a B' being only a selection" (117).

The general thesis of the paper is that the concepts of datum, conclusion, warrant, and backing will be far more useful in the analysis of arguments as opposed to just premise and conclusion analysis. Generally, Toulmin uses the term data to represent what I know to be premises, and claims to represent what I know to be conclusions (97). Warrants are sort of links, or connections, or bridges which authorize the steps from data to conclusion. Warrants are not all of equal strength – some link the data and conclusion together more strongly than others (i.e. 'necessarily', 'probably', 'presumably' (100)). Data are often appealed to explicitly in an argument (stated) whereas warrants are often appealed to implicitly (unstated). Warrants are a necessary part of argumentation; however, it is not necessary that they be stated explicitly in the argument. Additionally, some warrants are qualified by what Toulmin calls qualifiers and conditions of rebuttal (101).

Toulmin also makes an important distinction between warrants and the backing of the warrants. The backing of warrants stand behind the warrants themselves and act as "assurances, without which the warrants themselves would possess neither authority nor currency" (103). Toulmin goes to great length to distinguish between warrants and backing as well as data and backing.

On page 108, Toulmin says that he is "interested primarily in arguments by which general propositions are applied to justify particular conclusions about individuals"; however, I am not sure the purpose of making this distinction. Are Toulmin's comments only applicable to arguments which move from the general to the particular? I think that this point needs some clarification in order to see the full implications of Toulmin's work in this article.

Toulmin sees the pattern of analysis that he proposes in this article as avoiding the difficulties often encountered in argumentation with the difference between claims of 'ever' and 'nearly every single' etc. (111). He thinks that traditional logic passes over the slight differences between similar qualifiers such as these and often leaves crucial differences unnoticed (111). His pattern of analysis "leaves no room for ambiguity: entirely separate places are left in the pattern for a warrant and for the backing upon which its authority depends" (111).

Another point which I think needs more qualification in Toulmin's article is the distinction between force and backing which is referenced on page 113. Toulmin asserts that there is a difference between force and backing; however I am not able to follow how that difference is manifested later in the paper. After this assertion, Toulmin goes on to consider differences in how different premises function in arguments, but, it's not clear to me whether or not this is an extension of the discussion of force and backing. Traditionally, premises in a syllogism are categorized as either major or minor. Toulmin says that the way they are categorized ought to be re-evaluated and major premises ought to be treated as warrants and that 'singular premises' express "a piece of information *from* which we are drawing a conclusion, a 'universal premiss' now expresses, not a piece of information at all, but a guarantee *in accordance with* which we can safely take the step from our datum to our conclusion" (114). Is this related to the discussion between force and backing? Or is it another matter entirely? I found this section of the paper to be somewhat difficult to follow (especially the end of page 113 and top of page 114).